



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Regional Office, 9721 Executive Center Drive N., St. Petersburg, FL 33702

FOR INFORMATION CONTACT:

Ben Higgins, Research Fishery Biologist
850-233-2994, email: ben.higgins@noaa.gov

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

NR01-034
October 1, 2001

NOAA FISHERIES RELEASES SEA TURTLES AFTER ANNUAL FISHING GEAR TESTING

Citizens Cautioned to Avoid Contact With Sea Turtles

Scientists from NOAA Fisheries' Panama City, Pascagoula and Galveston Laboratories conducted sea turtle/fishing gear interaction studies from Sept. 18-28, 2001. The turtles used during the testing have been released into the Gulf of Mexico.

Every year since the mid-1980s NOAA Fisheries has tested new and existing fishing gear designs in Gulf of Mexico waters near Panama City Beach, Fla. During the testing, biologists and fishing gear experts observe and videotape sea turtles' behavior to document how they interact with fishing gear. Scientists and managers use the data obtained from this important research to determine whether changes in fishing gear can be adopted by the industry to prevent the incidental take of sea turtles.

A key to the reliability of the research is that it entails the use of live, captive-raised loggerhead sea turtles. Each year 200 2-year-old loggerheads that were obtained as hatchlings under permit from the state of Florida and raised at NOAA Fisheries' Sea Turtle Facility in Galveston, Texas, are returned to Florida for use in the testing. On average, the turtles are 26 inches long and weigh 20 pounds.

"The loggerheads used for this research are not harmed in any way and are returned to the wild at the completion of the study," said research fishery biologist Ben Higgins. "We've always done everything possible to prepare these turtles for their reintroduction into the wild. Each one has a metal tag affixed to its right front flipper that has an identification code and a contact address embossed upon it. All evidence indicates that they become fully assimilated into the wild stocks and don't suffer any adverse effects from being raised in captivity or used in this research."

"When we complete the tests, we release the turtles in areas of the Gulf of Mexico where wild turtles of the same size and maturity are found," continued Higgins. "Once released, the turtles begin seeking sources of food and may venture into passes and bays where crabs and other shellfish, the staple of their diet, are commonly found. This is natural behavior for young sea turtles and people should allow them to forage unmolested." It is a violation of the Endangered Species Act for people to touch, disturb or injure sea turtles. The public should not approach or attempt to catch or feed them. Even small sea turtles will bite people and can inflict painful wounds if handled or provoked.

"Turtles that exit the water or appear to be experiencing difficulty swimming may have been injured," said Higgins. "People in Florida who see sea turtles that appear to be in distress or injured should contact the marine Law Enforcement Division of the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC) at (800) 342-5367. The FWC will ensure that such turtles are examined and treated by qualified wildlife professionals. If people encounter a dead sea turtle on a Florida beach, they should not remove any tags and report its location immediately to the FWC."

(MORE)

(2)

NOAA Fisheries urges citizens to report fishery violations during weekly business hours of 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. EDT, to its Southeast Region Law Enforcement Division at (727) 570-5344, or after hours and weekends to its National Enforcement Hotline at (800) 853-1964.

This and other Southeast Regional news releases and fishery bulletins are available on the region's Internet home page:

<http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov>

NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The agency conducts scientific research and provides services and products to support fisheries management, fisheries development, trade and industry assistance, enforcement, and protected species and habitat conservation programs.

###